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GUEST COLUMN



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(D - CA-50)
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Statement Before the House of Representatives

Mr. Speaker, I want to speak for a few minutes to a problem that I know faces congressmen all over this Nation. That is the lack of national burial space for our veterans of our Armed Forces.

I live in San Diego County, where we have almost 300,000 veterans. The national cemetery at Fort Rosecrans is out of space. There is no place for an honorable burial of a veteran in his or her hometown. We have to drive 100 miles or so to Riverside County, and that is just not what most families want to do with their loved ones. We have figured out an innovative solution in San Diego County that I want to share with my colleagues and hope that they help us pass a resolution from this Congress which would instruct the Department of Veterans Affairs to help us with this innovative solution.

I have introduced H.R. 4806, the Honorable Burial for Veterans Act, along with my colleagues and the San Diego County delegation, the gentleman from California (Mr. Cunningham), the gentlewoman from California (Mrs. Davis), and the gentleman from California (Mr. Issa).

Each and every veteran in our county is concerned that upon his or her demise, interment may become a source of frustration for family and close friends. Many

INNOVATIVE SOLUTION TO SCARCITY OF BURIAL SPACE FOR VETERANS

families are left with an impossible dilemma: cremation, where only a few spaces actually exist in the columbarium, or a ground burial at a cemetery a 2-hour drive away.

We should not force this decision on the families of our Nation's veterans. When we called on them to serve, they did not hesitate. Now, in their last hour, a grateful Nation should not hesitate to assist their families. My colleagues and I want to build a second National Cemetery in San Diego, and we are on the list to do that. In fact, it may take a decade or more before we get around to doing that cemetery on the VA list. In the meantime, we should not abandon our veterans' families in their time of grief.

My bill would provide San Diego with an interim solution. A local effort among the private sector and local authorities and veterans' organizations has produced what I would con-

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sider to be an excellent pilot program. Two parcels of land, about 20 acres each, have been identified in the northern and southern parts of our county in what are now private cemeteries. They have offered this land to the Veterans Administration free of charge to become what we will call satellite cemeteries to the National Cemetery in our county.

We have a generous offer of land from the Service Corporation International which would be donated to a 501(c)(3) organization, the Veterans Memorial Center and Museum in San Diego, who will then turn that over to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

I thank all the folks who have tried to come up with this solution back in San Diego: the general manager of the Glen Abbey Memorial Park; the regional president, western regional president of Service Corporation International, Richard Sells; and to Colonel Jesse Ugade, Brigadier General Robert Cardenas, Captain Tom Splitgerber, and David Brown, co-publisher and editor of the Veterans Journal of San Diego County, because they have devoted enormous hours in an attempt to find a solution for San Diego's veterans.

My bill would authorize the establishment of this satellite cemetery pilot project. It is not the ideal solution, but we have to wait for two decades to get that ideal solution for families who have served our Nation. With our limited Federal budget, families can in fact be helped by an innovative and creative effort to meet our national needs.

The Veterans Administration had a negative reaction when this first was broached to them. Any bureaucracy, it seems, does not look at innovative ideas with a very encouraging light.

So I hope to get a bill passed by Congress which would direct the VA to do this. Certainly providing a final resting place for our brave veterans must be one of our top priorities. I hope my colleagues will support this bill to see how it works in San Diego because it might be useful in their own communities also.